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BOOK REVIEWS



In the Land of the Wild Onion: Travels along Vermont's Winooski River

By Charles Fish (Burlington: University of Vermont Press and Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2006, pp. 253, \$29.95).

Charles Fish's book about the natural and cultural history of the Winooski River begins at the beginning—the headwaters in Cabot—and then winds like the river itself, flowing through personal conversations, observations, and descriptions of small-boat handling (and mis-handling), to regional ecology, the inner workings of sewer plants, and the economic and social dynamics of mills. Fish introduces us to the topology of the Winooski Valley and to delicious terms like “fluvial geomorphology” (p. 85); he lets us eavesdrop on complicated conversations about the Krag .30-40, which we learn is a good gun for hunting deer. And, whenever the text is at risk of becoming too dense or weighty, Fish gets back into his boat and we are offered a riffle of rapids, a wide bend with cows in the water, and other kinds of descriptive reprieve: “A rope hangs from a tree over a deep pool, waiting for kids when the weather warms” (p. 65).

In the Land of the Wild Onion is both carefully researched and completely personal. The author assumes, for the most part correctly, that everything knowable about the Winooski—its geology, oral history, land use, wildlife, floods, and cultural landmarks—is worthy of our attention. He begins, as we all do, with no knowledge at all: “When I played on the sand bank behind our School Street house,” says Fish, who grew up in Essex Junction, “I felt the grains between my toes, hot from the sun. No

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one told me that if I had been standing there some 18,000 years ago . . . I would have been covered by one to two miles of glacial ice and debris. . . . I was ignorant of the geological processes by which streams and lakes and seas produce sand for little boys to play in” (pp. 1–2). Nobody stays ignorant for long, though, and Fish takes us down the river at a paddler’s companionable pace, pausing at the Cabot Creamery, the Marshfield cemetery, and Arch Cole’s woodworking shop, where for thirty years Cole kept a log of local events—“fires, storms, accidents, the influenza epidemic, the progress of hydropower, the price of eggs and beans” (p. 26). He visits with Hap Hayward in Marshfield to talk about mills—Hayward’s own, but also the many now-vanished mills along the river—and what they made and who ran them, including the impressively named Molly’s Falls Electric Light Company, established in 1901, which was once described by a visitor as looking as though the proprietor had “whittled it out of wood” (p. 30).

From here, Fish launches into the spouting, squishing, squeezing, folding, lifting, freezing, thawing, and flooding that is the story of geology, explores the wildlife and habitat in the Winooski watershed, and, with an air of inevitability, finds, digs, and eats some of the river’s eponymous wild onions. These shifts of focus, from long-lost lakes to “It’s an onion all right, sharp and tasty” (p. 67), illustrate the book’s overarching impulse—nothing is too small, or too large, for Fish’s attention.

A stop at the water treatment plant in Montpelier reminds us that the Winooski is a dirty river, although much cleaner than it used to be. The process of screening, settling, aerating, digesting, and generally messing around with human waste leads into a wider discussion of the other horrid things we pour into our surface water through point- and non-point-source pollution. Although the river is no longer an open sewer, the author reports that in his lifetime an observer could still determine “how high the Winooski had risen by where the toilet paper hung in the stream-side branches” (p. 70). Those days may be gone, but many water quality issues remain, the largest being erosion. “It may come as a surprise,” Fish writes, “that the biggest single pollutant of Vermont’s waters and the Winooski itself is none of the above but nature’s own product, the soil, or, to be a bit more technical, mineral sediments” (p. 78). The more we mess with the river—to control flooding, to keep it predictably in one place—the more harm we inflict. This discussion leads gracefully into a chapter on stream dynamics which then segues neatly into another chapter on paddling (and some comically awkward portaging) along the river.

Sadly, the river makes something of a thematic retreat in the final third of the book, which is more focused on a bobcat hunter, a tragic collision between a car and a train, a haunted house from childhood, the continuing presence of the Abenaki, and a chapter on trapping fur. Under the

accumulating weight of these narratives, the sinuous hiss of water over stone and gravel steadily recedes, and the final chapter on tracking game, called “Learning to See,” is perfectly fine in its own right but reads like part of some other book. At its low point, it even quotes an organizational mission statement, which talks sonorously about “requirements,” “densities,” and “degradation” (p. 219), and signals unambiguously that we have come a long way from the more limpid pleasures of the headwaters. There, the closest thing we got to an administrative declaration was the Stone Museum’s plaintive but pleasing, “Please Feel Free to Look at Stones/ Please Stay out of Building/Not Safe No Insurance/Gone After More Stones” (pp. 11–12). The lapse late in the book into less inspiring prose is disappointing chiefly because the author has exceeded all reasonable expectations up until now, and it must be added that he continues to write well even as he drags us to places we may not want to go.

That said, *In the Land of the Wild Onion* is an important chronicle of Vermont’s key watershed, along with its geologic, economic, and social history, and also represents a long bout of deep, interesting research that results in both notes and a list of sources that includes many documents that are intriguing gotta-haves, and at least one not-yet-published. Those of us made happy by bibliographies will come away satisfied, and those of us who want to be cradled in the arms of a trustworthy author will have no complaints either. This publication does not allow its reviewers to assign stars; if it did, this book would get the maximum allotment.

HELEN HUSHER

Helen Husher is the author of three books about Vermont, most recently a memoir, Conversations with a Prince: A Year of Riding at East Hill Farm. She lives in Montpelier.

Crossings: A History of Vermont Bridges

By Robert McCullough (Montpelier: Vermont Agency of Transportation and Barre: Vermont Historical Society, 2006, pp. xviii, 380; paper, \$24.95).

Most of us have experienced a “bridge moment”—a back-road encounter with an early iron bridge, the first time we saw the 468-foot Windsor-Cornish covered bridge, or perhaps the feeling we’re home when we cross a concrete span into a village. Bridges connect us with place and with history. As Eric DeLony, long-time director of the His-

toric American Engineering Record, observes in his excellent preface for *Crossings*, “old bridges may represent outdated technologies, yet they provide a connection with that vanishing past by softening its collision with the future” (p. xvii). This book is for readers who have come to love Vermont’s surviving historic bridges and who want to learn more in order to preserve them.

Vermont is in the forefront of efforts nationwide to preserve historic bridges. In the late 1990s the state passed legislation to encourage retention rather than replacement of historic crossings. Studies have shown that rehabilitation is usually less expensive than replacement and that the scale and design of old bridges maintain the traditional character of city, village, or countryside. The state has lost many bridges of great beauty and engineering importance, a fact underlined by the author’s use of some 300 historical and documentary illustrations, the majority images of bridges that survive only on paper.

McCullough begins with an art-historical approach to the symbolic and aesthetic aspects of bridges, representing the “hand of man” in the Vermont landscape. Examining the work of Vermont artists and photographers, he finds that bridges may be seen as fragile structures dwarfed by picturesque nature, minor elements in a rural landscape. They may be portals leading us into a village view. Or they may be engineering achievements, representing industrialization and urbanization, the power of the factory and the railroad. The chapter ends with Sabra Field’s print of a Pratt through truss over the White River, an image that captures both the experience of driving through a 1929 highway bridge and the broad scenic approach through farm fields. As Field describes her epiphany on a drive up Route 100, she “realized what makes the Vermont landscape so appealing: the balance of the natural and the man-made” (p. 34).

The bulk of the book is a typology by materials, with chapters tracing bridge evolution from timber or stone to iron, then concrete and steel. It covers Vermont’s settlement period up to the era of the interstate highways and includes the grand, the humble, and anomalies such as Brookfield’s floating bridge. Highway bridges predominate, though there are also railroad bridges and a few pedestrian crossings. Period photographs bring construction methods to life and take us back to opening ceremonies and early vehicular traffic. The horizontal format of the book (8" × 10") enables the grouping of photographs, which may show construction sequences, several bridges for comparison, or the evolution of crossings at one site.

Bob McCullough began recording Vermont’s bridges in the 1980s and currently co-manages the Vermont Historic Bridge Program as well as teaching in the University of Vermont’s Historic Preservation Program.

His interests lie in the immediate cultural context: the business of bridge building, the stories of individual builders, the process of community decision making, the establishment of the Vermont Society of Engineers, the role of the railroads and, later, the state highway department, and the state and federal regulatory context. National influences are lightly included—the Good Roads Movement of the turn of the last century is mentioned several times before the author gives a cursory explanation of this colorful national impetus for highway improvement. McCullough makes no attempt to compare and contrast the range of Vermont bridges with those in other states or regions of the U.S., to establish Vermont's place in the larger picture of historic or surviving spans.

Following a concluding chapter on preservation issues and strategies, there is a selected inventory of bridges by county, giving dates, locations, and structural types. This list includes all surviving public examples of the major early bridge types and a sampling of minor and later types. Statistics on the early bridges would have been a useful addition, as would a glossary of technical terms or diagrams to help readers identify bridge components. Readers having trouble following the book's narrative descriptions of bridge engineering will find the well-illustrated and readable chapter on bridges in David Weitzman's *Traces of the Past: A Field Guide to Archaeology* a useful supplement.

McCullough's prose can be noncommittal. Photo captions often duplicate the text. Readability would have been improved if only data such as year built, builder, style, length, and location had been provided in a systematic format in the captions and narrative had been left to the text. The author does not capture the physical experience of a bridge, either in the past or in the present. What was it like to cross a wooden-decked bridge in a horse-drawn vehicle or an early automobile? What appeals to our senses as we cross a historic bridge today?

McCullough's research is voluminous, his sources largely primary, including the archives of the Vermont Agency of Transportation, state and local historical societies, and town records. With forty-seven pages of notes and a bibliographical essay, there are ample references to additional information. The book is also well indexed.

Writing about American bridges occurs in several genres. There are technical sources, such as Weitzman's book. There are also books on individual bridge types, most often covered bridges. Most common are the state inventory publications that appeared in the early 1990s, an accessible and well-illustrated genre that raised preservation consciousness with basic historical and engineering information and details about important sites. *Crossings* has its roots in this genre, but with its greater detail it sacrifices some ease of use and becomes more of a reference book,

providing background material that will serve preservationists and researchers interested in local and engineering history. It could serve as the basis for a visitor-friendly statewide guide to historic bridges as well as regional and local guides and websites that will increase appreciation of these culturally significant, often endangered, and, for the most part, readily accessible resources.

LESLIE GOAT

Leslie Goat's interest in bridges began in Eric DeLony's class in industrial archaeology at the University of Vermont in the early 1980s. She works in the Dartmouth College Library and Rauner Special Collections.

Benedict Arnold's Navy: The Ragtag Fleet that Lost the Battle of Lake Champlain but Won the American Revolution

By James L. Nelson (New York: McGraw Hill, 2006, pp. 386, \$24.95).

James Nelson opens his excellent new book by quoting from nineteenth-century naval historian Alfred Thayer Mahan's classic, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History*: "That the Americans were strong enough to impose the capitulation of Saratoga was due to the invaluable year of delay secured to them in 1776 by their little navy on Lake Champlain, created with the indomitable energy, and handled with the indomitable courage of the traitor, Benedict Arnold." Of course the 1776 Battle of Valcour was four long years before Arnold became an infamous traitor. Nelson's new book presents, in part, the military career of Arnold during the first three years of the American Revolution when, it can be argued, he was the most effective general fighting for the American cause.

Beginning with the well-known story of the taking of Fort Ticonderoga by Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys in May 1775, we are reminded that Arnold was a central character in the Northern Theater of the war, and remained so through the Battle of Saratoga in October 1777. Benedict Arnold is one of the world's most fascinating and controversial characters, and Nelson has produced a masterfully researched and wonderfully written account of this amazing man and the times in which he lived.

With painstaking accuracy and a relaxed readable style, Nelson escorts the reader from Lake Champlain through the incredible Canadian campaign and back to Lake Champlain for the pivotal naval engagement

that helped define the outcome of the war. Finally, the book concludes with Arnold's profound connection to the American victory at Saratoga. Along the way, Arnold's conflicts with fellow officers and Congress provide the backdrop of his later treason.

Some might find the book's title a bit misleading, as the centerpiece of the story, the Battle of Valcour Island, is saved for the latter section of the book. In fact, the assembling and dismantling of the fleet is wonderfully integrated within the three-year historical story and is a most effective way to tell the wider story of Benedict Arnold and his role as a principal player in some of the most significant events during the early years of the American Revolution.

While the charismatic, courageous, but often conflicted Arnold remains central to the story, the role of other high-ranking Americans such as Philip Schuyler, Horatio Gates, David Wooster, and George Washington are interwoven into the story. The British side is well represented by Sir Guy Carleton, John Burgoyne, George Germain and Charles Douglas. But Nelson goes beyond politicians and general staff by skillfully weaving in the perspective of both the American and British rank-and-file combatants.

Although direct quotations are not footnoted, the "Note on Sources" and the "Bibliography" are helpful. Nelson has liberally utilized the valuable nineteenth-century *American Archives* compiled by Peter Force and the Naval Historical Center's *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*. He has also taken advantage of many Arnold biographies, including the very fine *Benedict Arnold: Revolutionary Hero* by James Kirby Martin published in 1997 by New York University Press. While many recent Arnold biographers have had access to similar sources, it is the way Nelson weaves these sources together that is special. In the fine tradition of Kenneth Roberts, the book tells the almost day-to-day story of the Northern Campaign, but whereas Roberts introduces fictional characters to tell his story, Nelson's tale is told by the actual participants.

The readable storytelling style will make this book a welcome addition to any library, particularly for those with an interest in Champlain Valley or Revolutionary War history. It has the unusual virtue of being accessible and enjoyable for both general readers and scholars. Nelson's account of the Battle of Valcour Island is first rate. His obvious knowledge of vessels, tactics, and maritime affairs adds a valuable perspective to his analysis and interpretation of the naval contest. His explanations of these technical maneuvers, often confusing to the landsman, are presented in a clear, easy to follow fashion, and his previous writings have earned him the praise of the legendary Patrick O'Brian.

James Nelson's new book combines a momentous period in history

with an extraordinary central character and masterfully presents one of the most important and underappreciated episodes in American history. That James Nelson does it so well is a compliment to this history and to himself.

ART COHN

Art Cohn is the Executive Director of the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum. In 1997 his research team located Benedict Arnold's gunboat Spitfire, and since 1999, has been systematically mapping the submerged battlefield at Valcour Island.

*Slavery/Antislavery in New England.
Annual Proceedings of the Dublin Seminar
for New England Folklife, Volume 28*

Edited by Peter Benes (Boston: Boston University Press, 2005, pp. 184, paper, \$25.00).

Every June the Dublin Seminar convenes to consider some aspect of New England life; as many as twenty scholars present papers, and a selection of these is published in an annual series that dates back to 1976. The current volume includes twelve articles and abstracts of seven other papers from the 2003 session. Most of the authors are “professional” historians (i.e., with Ph.D.s), but the collection includes independent scholars, an Indian elder, and a museum educator as well. Eight papers concern people or places in Massachusetts, two cover New Hampshire, and one each Connecticut and Rhode Island; Vermont is not represented. Although titled “slavery/antislavery in New England,” several papers address African-American history more broadly.

These volumes remind me of a box lot at a country auction—a miscellany of related items of disparate quality whose values are at least somewhat in the eye of the beholder. That said, the “best” article arguably is “Pauper Apprenticeship in Narragansett Country: A Different Name for Slavery,” by Ruth Wallis Herndon and Ella Wilcox Sekatau. Although apprenticeship had long been used to train young people in various trades, *pauper* apprenticeship—the indenturing of impoverished children or orphans—was not always so benign. As used against the Narragansett Indians in eighteenth-century Rhode Island, Herndon and Sekatau argue, it was akin to slavery. Many of these children were neither orphaned nor impoverished, but were taken from their parents because their labor

was desired in white households. After analyzing 759 indentures signed in six communities from 1720 to 1820, the authors conclude “that this form of unfree labor provided economic profit to the masters, separated children from their parents’ culture and placed them in an inferior position in another culture, and trained young people for an adulthood of menial service” (p. 68).

Valerie Cunningham presents a 1779 petition for freedom by twenty “natives of Africa” in New Hampshire. The petitions that Prince Hall and others in Boston submitted to the Massachusetts legislature are well known, but this effort was new to me. Cunningham’s suggestion that a network of communication and assistance existed among these early petitioners is intriguing. Similarly, Jennifer Alpert’s research on Boston’s Anti-Man Hunting League will probably be new to many. Formed in 1854 in response to the rendition of Anthony Burns under the new Fugitive Slave Law, the secret association was dedicated to kidnapping slave hunters. It’s hard not to find the elaborate plans concocted by the League’s members—prominent lawyers, physicians, clergymen, and merchants—slightly humorous; they actually diagrammed and practiced the kidnapping in an odd sort of choreography. Still, local leagues with more than 450 members were formed in twenty-nine towns, and that represents a considerable commitment to physical force and breaking the law, even if the plans were never put into action.

Articles by Diane Cameron and Elizabeth A. Congdon relate the lives of ordinary people of color. Cameron traces Quash Gomer and his family through four generations, from Africa to New England and the eighteenth century to the American Civil War. Although Gomer was ultimately able to sign his name and raised the money to buy his freedom, he did not prosper. Nor did his children. His grandson, “a quiet well-disposed youth,” joined Connecticut’s “colored” regiment but died before mustering out. Calvin T. Swan, born free in Northfield, Massachusetts, in 1799 (the year Quash Gomer died), on the contrary, is a story of success. Apprenticed to a local builder, he became a skilled craftsman and was a landowner and leader in his “rather isolated mountain community” (p. 118). Congdon speculates that Swan’s white neighbors may have accepted him into their “web of mutual support” (p. 121) because they were Methodists opposed to slavery.

Recovering African-American history is a slow process, and each new offering adds to our understanding. Although nothing in this volume relates directly to Vermont, it is still of interest to Green Mountain readers and scholars. Certainly there were Vermonters of color like Quash Gomer and Calvin Swan whose stories are yet to be told. Indeed, Diane Cameron puts her finger on it when she says, “Long regarded as irretrievable

and insignificant, stories of ordinary enslaved and free eighteenth- and nineteenth-century African Americans dramatize their struggle for freedom and self-sufficiency. The fragments of information hidden in the recesses of old records challenge historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists to direct their focus toward the individuals who faced the challenges of enslavement and emancipation in New England. Rediscovered, these stories, although incomplete, increase our knowledge of specific issues and enlarge our understanding of the Northern slave experience and its legacy” (p. 114). Amen.

JANE WILLIAMSON

Jane Williamson is the director of Rokeby Museum, a National Historic Landmark Underground Railroad site in Ferrisburgh, Vermont.

The Inquest

By Jeffrey Marshall (Burlington: University of Vermont Press and Hanover: University Press of New England, 2006, pp. xii, 271, \$24.95).

The writer of historical fiction sails on potentially perilous waters. Literal-minded historians will make a point of spotting anachronisms and inaccuracies. Credulous readers will be inclined to ignore artistic license and take the story at face value. (George Washington really did chop down that cherry tree, didn't he?) Jeffrey Marshall, a historian and archivist at the University of Vermont, has taken on the challenge. In my view, he has succeeded. His novel tells a fictional story that holds our interest. It also paints a detailed and well-researched picture of Burlington in 1830.

The documentary record from which the novel springs is disappointingly scanty. Sorting through court records that survived the 1982 Chittenden County Court House fire, Marshall found a transcript relating evidence presented at an inquest after the death of Experience “Speedy” Goodrich, a 23-year-old Burlington woman who died, probably of septic complications, following an induced abortion in 1830. Very little additional information has survived about Speedy or the circumstances of her demise. A University of Vermont medical student named Charles D. Daggett was implicated, but never formally charged, with complicity in the abortion.

Marshall gives voices to Daggett, to Speedy's sister Nancy (Goodrich) Proctor, and to a fictional UVM undergraduate called Stephen Decatur Parker, and has each of them tell the story as he or she saw it unfold.

Their worlds, while intersecting, are rather different, and so they give their accounts with disparate perspectives and language. From Charles Daggett, we learn about the uneasy state of medical education and science in that era. Doctors very much wanted to find solid scientific grounding for their efforts and to earn public approval for their success, but apart from bone setting, a few surgical procedures, opium, and cathartics, their list of really useful interventions was short indeed. The public was not inclined to revere or even trust “medical men” very deeply, and the increasing efforts of male physicians to enter the world of midwifery disturbed many of the women whose lives and health were at stake.

Arriving in Burlington in the summer of 1830 to enroll at the University of Vermont, Stephen Decatur Parker finds himself in the midst of a stimulating intellectual community surrounding such luminaries as UVM President James Marsh and Unitarian minister George Ingersoll. Getting young Stephen a seat at a dinner table conversation with James Marsh, James’s cousin George Perkins Marsh, Rev. Ingersoll, and a young woman from Boston with whom he falls madly in love, is perhaps a bit of a stretch, but that’s where artistic license comes into play. We thus hear of James Marsh’s newly published edition of a philosophical work by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and of George Perkins Marsh’s ideas about human influences on natural events. The latter would not be published until many years later, and having him discuss his thoughts in an 1830 conversation may be an anachronism, but the devastating flood often referred to in this book really did happen in Vermont in 1830, and it may well have influenced Marsh’s later thoughts and writings.

Speedy’s younger sister Nancy tells her story in the voice of a Victorian novel, and an author risks descending into parody with discourse like, “What anguish I endured! How unjust to be subjected to this scrutiny and humiliation on top of my grief! Could Job himself have suffered so, knowing that his conscience was pure and his faith unshaken?” (p. 257). But Marshall has read a lot of nineteenth-century letters in the course of his career, and Nancy speaks their language accurately, or at least she might well have written that way.

Like the inquest jury, we don’t really find out all the details of what happened to Speedy. We hear conflicting evidence and must, if we wish, make up our own minds. We reach no universally agreed-upon conclusion on the moral questions surrounding the practice of abortion, any more than the people of 1830 Burlington did, or any more than the people of 2006 Vermont do. As Marshall emphasizes both through his characters in the novel and in some back-matter commentary, these issues may have troubled people, but they were the subject of much less public debate in 1830 than they are today.

The Inquest seems to be aimed partly at high school and college curricula; it comes equipped with background information and a “Reading Group Guide” with discussion questions about its content and presentation. It provides some enjoyable walking tours of the busy and expanding village of Burlington, for which a map might have been a useful adjunct. Readers of many sorts of background and interest will find it entertaining, thoughtful, and educational.

JOHN A. LEPPMAN

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Four Marys and a Jessie: The Story of the Lincoln Women

By C. J. King (Manchester, Vt.: Friends of Hildene, 2005, pp. 251, paper \$19.95).

On sunny afternoon in late September 1930, a parade of sixty decorated cars and floats, three hundred more spectator cars, three bands, three drum corps and two airplanes headed north from the Vermont-Massachusetts border, tracing the new paved line of the Ethan Allen Highway. Celebrations such as this one are common in American history but each one has its distinctive qualities. The uniqueness here was the airplanes, still a novelty at the time. More exceptional perhaps was the fact that one was piloted by a local woman who was the great-granddaughter of President Abraham Lincoln.

This pilot, Mary Lincoln Beckwith, is last of the four Marys whose lives are the subject of this engaging book by C. J. King, who is herself a distant relative of the Lincoln family through the Harlan line. The first Mary is Mary Todd Lincoln, wife of Abraham Lincoln. The second is Mary Harlan Lincoln, wife of Robert Todd Lincoln. The third is Mary “Mamie” Lincoln Ishmam, daughter of Mary and Robert. And the fourth Mary, who was known as Peggy, is our pilot. Jessie Lincoln Beckwith is the second daughter and third child of Mary and Robert and mother of Peggy. Some readers might need the handy family tree printed in the book to match up the relations but most will find it unnecessary. The author brings each woman alive and weaves their stories into a larger compelling narrative of four generations of the Lincoln and Harlan families.

The story begins with the fascinating history of Mary Todd Lincoln, a woman of strong and sometimes odd beliefs and behaviors. Much of what King presents in her history of Mary Todd is well known and she draws on an extensive scholarship that is carefully cited. But it is her unique angle on Mary Todd that will make readers want to pick up this book. While other scholars have focused much of their attention on Mary Todd's public life, or on how her private life was revealed in the public cultures of Illinois and Washington, D.C., King shifts the picture to Mary Todd's search for privacy, safety, and an environment that would encourage good health. In August 1863 this search brought her and her sons Tad and Robert to Manchester, Vermont, where they stayed at the Equinox House. She returned the next year and made another reservation for the subsequent summer but the president's assassination put her on a different path. In 1872 her son Robert began visiting the area again and in 1903 he bought property and built Hildene, which Mamie and then Peggy inherited. Peggy turned Hildene into a working farm and upon her death directed that it should be "a memorial to my mother and grandparents" (p. 213).

Mary Todd and Peggy are the bookends of this narrative but there is also much interesting information here about the other Lincoln women thanks to a well-preserved public record as well as extensive oral history interviews that King has drawn upon. Mary Harlan's family and public life are well documented because of Robert's business and political successes. Jessie's record includes her daring elopement and sad divorces, the first of which resulted in eight-year-old Peggy never again seeing her father and the second of which made her father decide to leave her out of the Hildene inheritance. Sources about Mamie, who lived at what is now the 1811 House Inn in Manchester, are fewer and therefore her life is the least revealed in the narrative. For this, however, the author should be commended. While at times King speculates about how individuals felt about events taking place, in general she sticks close to the written record.

This is a wonderful book. It is much more than a history of one prominent family; it is a window on the political, religious, and social life of the last two centuries. Yet the stories that King tells of this notable family are as dramatic as any could be and because the perspective is women's and family history, they emphasize connections that are easily lost in traditional political histories. One example will suffice. In early July 1863, Mary Todd Lincoln was driving alone through Washington in the president's carriage. Rounding a sharp curve, the driver's seat fell off, Mary was injured, and was bedridden for three weeks. King writes that Mary's husband, "preoccupied with the bloody three-day battle of Gettysburg. . .

agonized alternately over his wife's illness and the horrendous number of Union casualties." (p. 57) Most historians follow this history to November and the bloody battlefield where President Lincoln gave his famous address. But King takes us from Washington, where an investigation revealed that the carriage had been sabotaged, to Vermont. With reporters still focused on the stories of the war and conspiracies, Mary Todd Lincoln and her two sons traveled to Manchester, Vermont, to escape to its restorative environment. Years later, one of those sons and his children and grandchildren—famous in a world increasingly fascinated by celebrities—would return, and stay, for similar reasons.

MELANIE GUSTAFSON

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Grace Coolidge: Sudden Star (A Volume in the Presidential Wives Series)

By Cynthia D. Bittinger (New York: Nova History Publications, 2005, pp. xiv, 125. \$31.50)

Back in 1989 I reviewed for *Vermont History* a recently reissued biography of Grace Coolidge by Ishbel Ross that had originally appeared in 1962. In my review I observed that, while the book stood up well as a public portrait of one of the nation's most popular first ladies, "it is the private Grace Coolidge who is missing from these pages." Fortunately, the private Grace Coolidge is much more in evidence in Cyndy Bittinger's *Grace Coolidge: Sudden Star*. This new, albeit brief, life of Vermont's only first lady by the executive director of the Calvin Coolidge Memorial Foundation, draws on previously untapped sources, including magazine articles and letters to family, friends, and fraternity sisters, to give us a more intimate and complex portrait of Calvin Coolidge's wife. The book is replete with telling details that reveal this popular first lady's character and show why she was in many respects the ideal candidate for that demanding and often thankless job. As Bittinger makes clear, Grace knew when to stay in the shadow of her husband and when it was permissible to show her true spirit.

A window onto Grace's role in the 1924 presidential campaign shows her and Calvin at the Coolidge Homestead away from the formality of

the White House with their divided functions as president and first lady. Grace, who normally stayed in the background when politics were discussed, on this occasion, by Bittinger's account, was "up front and center," participating in lively discussions with their guests, who included Henry Ford and Thomas Edison (p. 71).

As one of a series on first ladies put out by Nova History Publications, the focus of *Grace Coolidge: Sudden Star* is, not surprisingly, on her years in the White House. But the reader wishes that more than seven pages had been devoted to Grace's youth in Burlington and more than fifteen to her nearly quarter of a century of widowhood.

The section on Grace and Calvin's early years of marriage in Northampton is more filled out, and this book does a good job of describing how Grace made a life for herself in this western Massachusetts town by plunging wholeheartedly into community affairs. Here Bittinger brings to life the Coolidges as a solidly middle-class couple who believed in the importance of a strong family life (p. 39). This could only be done, they both believed, if Grace stayed in the background as she did when Calvin served as governor of Massachusetts.

Of particular interest in these pages is the role played by the Coolidges' great friends, Frank and Emily Stearns, in making Grace part of Calvin's political life. Frank, the owner of a big Boston department store, had unlimited faith in Coolidge's potential for high office, and became his chief supporter and promoter. It was Stearns who grasped Grace's political value to her husband. "She will make friends wherever she goes," he wrote of her, "and she will not meddle with his [Calvin's] conduct of the office" (p. 34).

While this new life of Grace Coolidge provides a more rounded portrait than previous biographies, it suffers from careless editing. Not having read any of the other books in this Nova series, I cannot tell if this is a common problem. Here, however, sentences are incomplete, words are left out or misspelled. In some instances individuals are named without being identified, or are only identified later in the book or in a footnote. In other cases, individuals are reintroduced unnecessarily, as is the case with John Coolidge's in-laws, the Trumbulls.

Another problem is the overuse of quotations that break the narrative flow. Many of the quoted passages could easily have been paraphrased. It's not at all clear why some passages are in quotes while others are not.

Finally, an index and a few illustrations would have been helpful. According to the author they will be included in the second printing.

These errors and omissions, unfortunately, are numerous enough to make reading this otherwise lively portrait of Grace Coolidge less of a

pleasure than its contents would warrant. Cyndy Bittinger has done her best to give us a readable life of this lively and charming Vermonter, but her editors have let her down.

DEBORAH P. CLIFFORD

Deborah P. Clifford is the author of several books on nineteenth-century American women, including a biography of the Vermont historian, Abby Maria Hemenway, The Passion of Abby Hemenway: Memory, Spirit, and the Making of History (Vermont Historical Society, 2001).

Middlesex in the Making; History and Memories of a Small Vermont Town

By Sarah Seidman and Patricia Wiley (Middlesex, Vt.: Middlesex Historical Society, 2006, pp. vii, 256, paper, \$20.00).

Middlesex was the first town settled in Washington County and this book is the first complete history that has been written since the town was founded in 1783. What distinguishes this impressive volume from the traditional town history is the inclusion of excerpts from interviews with more than seventy long-time residents.

The authors spent more than a decade researching local primary source documents, both published and unpublished, and interviewing the oldest residents. The volume corrects factual errors in previously published sources, such as *Ward Knapp Remembers Middlesex* (1978) and Hemenway's *Vermont Historical Gazetteer* (vol. 4 [1882]). The ample footnotes (even the acknowledgements section has footnotes) and extensive bibliography add to the usefulness of the book. More than 200 photographs make the book a pleasure to browse, and the eleven-page index is thorough and well done. The six appendices cover the geology of Middlesex, Native American settlements in the area, European exploration and settlement in the area, names of Middlesex war veterans from the French and Indian War up to the present Iraq War, a list of Middlesex town clerks from 1790 to 2006, and statistics on the population of Middlesex from 1783 to 2000. The information in the first three appendices could have been integrated into the body of the book, but they are still useful as separate sections.

The first six chapters of the book are devoted to the history of specific geographic areas within the town of Middlesex: Bear Swamp, the village, Middlesex Center and the Notch, Wrightsville, Putnamville and Lone-

some Bend, and Shady Rill and Points South. Maps at the beginning of each of these chapters show the area covered.

The development of the town has been shaped both by the forces of nature, such as the Flood of 1927, and major construction projects, such as the Wrightsville dam and Interstate 89. The Flood of 1927 destroyed most of the village of Middlesex and nearly all of its commerce, and the subsequent construction of the Wrightsville dam by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s resulted in the flooding or relocation of homes in the section of town known as Wrightsville, to assure the future safety of the residents of Montpelier. The construction of Interstate 89 further displaced families, bisected farms, and fragmented what was left of the town. Even though the population of Middlesex is larger now than at any previous time in its 223-year history, it is also true that the village “is only a humble shadow of the prosperous commercial center it was in the late 19th and early 20th centuries” (p. 27) and there are no longer any working dairy farms.

The history of almost every town is sprinkled with colorful characters, and Middlesex is no exception. Perhaps the best-known character was Crazy Chase, a naturally gifted musician who could play any tune after hearing it only once and who liked to dress in women’s clothing, both on and off stage. An earlier resident of Middlesex, Medad Wright, constructed the first circular sawmill in successful operation in Vermont and went on to invent and build a variety of manufacturing equipment. The best known resident of Middlesex today is Patrick Leahy, the youngest U.S. Senator ever to be elected from the Green Mountain State. The best known visitor to Middlesex was no doubt President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who came to the area in 1936 to see the dams built by the Civilian Conservation Corps.

Interspersed throughout the book are the most interesting memories of seventy-eight of the oldest residents of the town, nearly half of whom have died since the interviews were completed. Their stories of growing up early in the twentieth century, with its hardships and lack of many conveniences and amenities that we take for granted today should kindle a sense of appreciation for the progress we have made and the many material blessings that most of us enjoy today. Life in the early decades of the last century was typified by outhouses, kerosene lamps, flat irons, and a weekly trip to Montpelier on a horse-drawn wagon to buy groceries. People bathed in a washtub on Saturday night and children would use dishpans as sleds in the winter. Early radios were battery operated and some families in Middlesex did not get electricity until 1963. Horses pulling rollers would pack down the snow on the roads. Babies were delivered at home and children ran barefoot in the summer. Church services

were held only on the first Sunday of each month and there was less separation between church and state than is the norm today. Children's chores included emptying the chamber pots, helping with the barnwork, and filling the woodboxes for the stoves. In 1851 Middlesex had a dozen one-room schoolhouses and most children only attended school until they finished the eighth grade. In the 1800s Middlesex had a town-appointed overseer of the poor, as did many other Vermont towns, and selectmen could "warn out" families who threatened to become a financial burden to the town. A hearse driver was among the public officials elected at the town annual meeting.

Among the more recent significant events in the history of Middlesex were the founding of Middlesex College in 1964 and the establishment of a demonstration school operated by the Vermont Department of Education starting in 1972 to test new theories of education. The college folded after a brief existence and the demonstration school was widely seen as a complete failure. The town now has a well-respected elementary school and in recent decades the selectmen have dealt with other contentious issues, including town planning, zoning, and local taxes.

The authors have done an excellent job of integrating hard facts, personal anecdotes, and illustrative material into a town history that is a pleasure to read. One can only hope that some of the unpublished material cited in the footnotes will someday be made available to a wider audience, either in print or in a digital format that can be included on a website. This book should inspire other local historical societies to undertake oral history interviews of their oldest residents before the memories are forever lost. The photographs and personal stories should make this local history appealing to a wider audience than the typical small town history, including younger readers who rarely are active members of local historical societies.

HANS RAUM

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